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ABSTRACT

The experiences of Asian graduate students in the United States were explored to find out their reasons for coming to study at a particular university and to determine ways to improve their early experiences at U.S. institutions. Interviews were conducted with 12 graduate students in the university's School of Education. Seven of the 12 had chosen the university because the School of Education was highly regarded, and 5 students mentioned that the school was affordable. Six students chose to come in part because the university was in a small town, which seemed safer and possibly more welcoming. Participants expressed many disappointments in their initial experiences and interactions with Americans and many difficulties in adapting to the U.S. environment. These suggest the need for better supporting structures, especially when students arrive. The issue of cultural difference was always important for these students, and the differences between Eastern and Western cultures was especially evident in respect to class participation. The crucial barrier was English language proficiency, and students felt difficulty in expressing themselves in English even though they had scored well on the Test of English as a Foreign Language. Students were in strong agreement that prospective students should be well-grounded in English language skills. Their biggest concerns were about their ability to write and speak in English and their ability to read material in English rapidly. Implications for the development of programs to help foreign students adapt to the U.S. educational environment are discussed. (SLD)

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Listen to Their Voices: Expectations and Experiences of Asian Graduate Students

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Listen to Their Voices: Expectations and Experiences of Asian Graduate Students

Introduction

In recent years, American colleges and universities have witnessed a steady increase in international student enrollment. According to the IIE's (Institution of International Education) Annual Report on International Educational Exchange in the 2000/2001 academic year, "The number of international students attending colleges and universities in the United States increased by 6.4% to a record total of 547, 867." This was the highest increase over the last two decades. California led the nation in hosting international students (up more than 12% to 74,281), followed by New York (up 6% to 58,286). This study began in the Spring Semester of 2002. The research site was in one of the biggest universities in the Midwest. The participants were graduate students from Asian countries studying in the School of Education at a large Midwestern research university. The purpose of the study was threefold. First, to gain further knowledge from first year Asian graduate students in the states, in terms of their reasons for attending the school, expectations they had prior to coming to the school and whether those expectations had been matched, and what they would say to prospective students. The second purpose was to identify and continue to encourage aspects of the program that contribute to Asian students' positive experiences of

studying in this institution. The third purpose of this study was to make informed recommendations to the institution that might help improve the experiences of Asian students who choose to participate in this academic community.

Problem Statement

International students have a great deal to offer academic communities in the United States. According to Open Doors 2001, the annual report on international education published by the Institute of International Education (IIE) with support from the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, "The number of international students attending colleges and universities in the United States increased by 6.4% in the 2000/2001 academic year to a record total of 547,867." 324,812 were from Asia, which was 7.5% higher than it was in the previous academic year.

At the research university, in which the current study was conducted, a total of 3,558 international students were enrolled in the 2001-2002 academic year, comprising 9.4 percent of the total population. Among graduate students, international students numbered 1,846, comprising 28.6 percent of all graduate students. As reported in the *Office of the Registrar 2001-2002 Fall Enrollment Report,* the top ten countries sending students to this university were as follows:

1. South Korea 700

2.	India	344
3.	China	300
4.	Japan	219
5.	Taiwan	217
6.	Indonesia	165
7.	Canada	136
8.	Germany	84
9.	Turkey	82
10.	Hong Kong	81

In the School of Education, the five leading countries with the highest representation of graduate students are as follows:

1.	South Korea	68
2.	Taiwan	60
3.	Turkey	41
4.	Japan	20
5.	China	16

With these encouraging numbers, institutions that invite international students to invest their knowledge, cultural background and finances in the academic host

community have the responsibility to meet the needs of international students. This concept was at the core of our research. Because most of the leading countries are Asian countries, the focus of this study, therefore, tends to investigate the perspectives of Asian graduate students.

Literature Review

The Council of Graduate Schools' website, http://www.cgsnet.org, mentioned that size and location of the school, and students' particular interests, academic backgrounds, and goals are factors that often influence a person's decision about where to pursue graduate studies. Talbot, Maier, and Rushlau (1996) found that the most important factors that influenced the choice of a potential program were the reputation of the program, institution, and faculty; location of the institution; and opportunity for assistantships or other financial support.

Regardless of the reasons upon which international graduate students base their decision to study in the United States, all of them face many challenges beyond those confronted by their North American peers. Cultural differences often add stress to their already demanding academic lives. According to Kornblum (1991), "Culture refers to the total system of values, beliefs, attitudes, traditions and behavioral norms regulating life among a particular group of people." In addition to becoming acquainted with differences in educational practices, negotiating the simplest

day-to-day activities in a new culture can become very complex for international students and demand a great deal of their time, energy and stamina. The Counseling Center webpage at The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (1996) stated,

Most people go through a process of adaptation when they move into a new culture. Some of the things that make this adaptation process difficult include:

- having to use a foreign language.
- not being sure how to interact with people in authority.
- not having a clear idea of how to make friends with people from different cultures.
- not having a clear idea of how to date people from different cultures.
- not being understood when you express yourself in your usual way.
- finding that food and eating customs are different.
- finding that religious practices are different.
- finding large differences in the educational system.
- finding that some people in the new culture are impatient when you don't understand things right away.
- finding that some people are prejudiced against others from different cultures.

In addition, Furnham (1986) stated, "Many international students struggle with problems upon their entry into the U.S. Some of the problems identified by

international students are related to language, financial situation, academic stress, social interactions with Americans, food, and loneliness/homesickness. Furthermore, Trice (2001),Cadman (2000), Cannon (2000), Angelova & Riazantseva (1999), Luzio-Lockett (1998), Perrucci & Hu (1995), Selvadurai (1992), reported that for international students with limited English proficiency skills, the English language seems to be one of the greatest challenges they face while studying in the United States.

In light of the literature regarding the numerous cultural adjustments made by international students who choose to study in the United States, every possible effort to help them in their attempt to succeed at this university is desirable.

Methodology

Data collection

Instead of investigating international students, attempts were made to interview first year Asian graduate students who were enrolled in the School of Education during the 2001-2002 academic year since most leading countries in this School of Education were from Asia. Twelve Asian graduate students were interviewed by asking the following questions:

1. Why did you choose to come to this School of Education? Please tell me

about your personal/social reasons or others such as the influence of certain individuals or institutions.

2. What were your knowledge and expectations (academic/cultural/social/other) before you came here? Please be specific and articulate your feelings whether positive or negative.
3. How have your experiences matched (or not matched) your expectations?
4. How do you perceive expectations made of you as a student in your department?
5. What would you say to someone from your own country who was considering graduate studies in the School of Education at this university?

The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed right after the interviews by the researchers. During the data collection period, the researchers met monthly for at least three hours to analyze the data, reach consensus, and categorize all of the interviewees' responses.

Participants

Among the 1,203 graduate students in the School of Education at the studied university, 275 were international students. 185 were Asian students. The researchers interviewed twelve participants from different programs in the School of Education.

Table 1: Participant information

Pseudonym	Department	Gender	Nationality	Degree sought
Tae	Language Education	Female	Thailand	Ph.D.
Kim	Language Education	Female	South Korea	Master
Keiko	Educational Leadership	Female	Japan	Master
Wang	Art Education	Male	Taiwan	PhD
Sakurai	International & Comparative Education	Male	Japan	Master
Lily	Elementary Education	Female	Taiwan	Master
Mei-Hua	Early Childhood Education	Female	Taiwan	Ph.D.
Jin Ho	Curriculum and Instruction	Female	South Korea	PhD
Kang	Educational Psychology	Male	Taiwan	Ph.D.
Min Hee	Counseling	Female	South Korea	Master
Song	Instructional System Technology	Male	South Korea	Ph.D.
Mee Joon	Science Education	Female	South Korea	Master

Table 2: Participants by citizenship

	Total number of international students in the SOE as of June 2002	Number of first year international students interviewed
Argentina	1	0
Bahamas	1	0
Bangladesh	1	0
Botswana	1	0
Brazil	1	0
Brit/Indian	1	0
Cameroon	1	0
Canada	8	0
Chile	1	0
China	16	0

Germany	1	0
Ghana	2	0
Hong Kong	4	0
Iceland	1	0
India	2	0
Iran	1	0
Ireland	1	0
Jamaica	1	0
Japan	**20**	**2**
Kazakhstan	1	0
Kenya	3	0
Malaysia	4	0
Mexico	3	0
Nigeria	1	0
Oman	1	0
Pakistan	1	0
Portugal	1	0
Russia	1	0
Saudi Arabia	6	0
Singapore	3	0
Slovakia	1	0
South Africa	1	0
South Korea	**68**	**5**
Taiwan	**60**	**4**
Thailand	**6**	**1**
Turkey	41	0
UK	6	0
United Arab E.	1	0
Venezuela	1	0
Total	275	12

Findings

In the analysis of the interview content, the researchers applied two different ways to present those data. One is presented by lists; another one is by a thick description to weave the individual narratives as a complete story in order to get a holistic picture of the participants' own experiences. Twelve participants' narratives were compared with each other after transcribing the interviews. The researchers were surprised to discover strong thematic similarities between these twelve participants, narratives that sprung from very different actual experiences. Several themes emerged

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from our analysis, including the process of adaptations, constraints, challenges the participants face, and recommendations for the institution and people who consider coming to study. When asked their reasons for coming to the School of Education, most of the participants responded with several reasons:

a) Ranking/Reputation

Seven out of twelve students chose this university because the School of Education or their particular department had a high ranking. Some examples of their responses were as follows.

- "The School of Education was ranked as one of the best education schools." (Kang)
- "I came to this university because its ranking is above the universities that I was admitted to." (Mee Joon)
- "I checked the ranking and applied for nine schools. This university was the best among my applications." (Lily)
- "The ranking of this school is better than those other schools I had applied to." (Sakurai)
- "Basically the major factor on which to base my decision was ranking." (Tae)
- "My department is quite high ranking, so that's why I came here." (Song)

b) Financial concerns

Low expense

Before these students came to this university, they also considered living expenses and tuition. Five students mentioned the living costs and/or tuition at this school. They said,

- "This is a good town to live in in terms of expenses and environment." (Tae)
- "My parents could afford this kind of tuition." (Mei-Hua)
- "I didn't want to go to expensive universities. This university is one of the very prestigious schools. Tuition is not so expensive." (Jin Ho)
- "This university was cheaper." (Wang)
- "The costs of living would be O.K. for my budget." (Mee Joon)

c) Location

The fact that this university is located in a small town was also one of the reasons six students choose to come to this school. They considered the safety of a small town, especially after the 911 attack. Climate and country-like environment were also one of the reasons. Some examples of their quotes are as follows:

- "I prefer countryside rather than big cities. In addition, this university is a good place and safe." (Keiko)
- "We do not like the big city. We like it here because it is a small town and a

good place for foreigners to study." (Kang)

- "It is a good town to live in in terms of expenses and environment." (Lily)
- "I wanted to experience life in the Midwest instead of on the East coast because I thought life (in the Midwest) would be more relaxed. I was afraid of big cities." (Jin Ho)
- "Climate was another reason. X city was so cold." (Wang)

d) Program availability

Min Hee mentioned that there were few schools offering counseling programs. Thus, when this university accepted her, she considered coming here because of the high reputation of the department. She replied, "There are not many schools that have counseling programs. This university was the best among my applications."

Adaptation

Concerning the process of adaptation, the participants expressed many disappointments and misgivings which suggest the need for better supporting structures, especially when international students first arrive. Wang recalled that he was forced to move out of the on-campus temporary dorm within the first two days of his arrival. He didn't know whom he could ask for help in terms of looking for an apartment. He stated that he was scared to death and he struggled by himself to open an banking account, look for an apartment, purchase furniture and register for classes.

Mei expressed how lonely and depressed she was when she first arrived:

> I didn't find anyone in my department to help me. I didn't know how to get an email account or register for classes. I was so depressed, so I was thinking of going back and giving up my dreams of completing the degrees. I didn't realize being away from family was that terribly hard until I arrived here. I was crying every day.

Song stated that it would have meant a lot to his adaptation in this new environment and it would have been much easier if there were someone who had offered him an airport pickup and a temporary house. He also admitted,

> I suffered from jet lag for two weeks. I didn't know how to handle my life properly so I felt very, very down. I was shocked that Americans didn't have any patience to allow me to finish my sentences. They just despised my accent and language ability. I was an English teacher in Taiwan, so I didn't expect so much hostility towards my English before I came. I realized how differently English is used here than it was taught in my country. I used to listen to English radio programs in order to practice my listening while I was in Taiwan. I assumed English is always spoken clearly by native speakers like the radio programs or my teachers in Taiwan. I cannot believe that I can hardly understand English-speaking due to the fact that Americans use many slang,

slurred sounds and vague sounds.

Before Mei-Hua came to the United States for her graduate studies, she always dreamt of the promise of her future studies in America. She dreamt she could make a lot of American friends, improve her English rapidly, and have a colorful life. To her disappointment, she found it hard to make American friends, and the only thing she could do every day was sit at her desk and study hard. She said, "I could not control my tears whenever my mom called me on the phone. I have never been through such loneliness and pressure in my life."

Despite their previous hopeful anticipations, these participants' responses to adapting to the American environment show that they have suffered from loneliness, disconnection, and adaptation problems.

Cultural Differences

The issue of cultural difference was always an important element in the cross-cultural experience, especially with the confrontation between Eastern and Western culture. Most Asian students have been educated by Confucius' beliefs for thousands of years. Humility and politeness are the supreme social and interpersonal values in most Asian cultures. The participants indicated that they are always concerned about harmony and avoidance of voicing argumentative opinions. Mei-Hua was surprised at the emphasis her professors put on classroom participation, a style

she was not used to, and had been discouraged to do in her own country. In her culture, she was educated to listen carefully instead of talking actively. She explained that her parents and teachers in Taiwan always instilled in her that talking and arguing are forms of bragging about herself. She has been told for years and years "silence is gold."

Wang also encountered these extreme contradictions of cultural values in his experiences of classroom participation. He still feels uncomfortable in classroom participation because he was told to respect the authority of professors and elders. Most of his classmates were much older and more experienced than him, so he never had encouragement to talk in front of them. He further explained, "while Asian students tend to be moderate, Americans love to challenge and criticize." In other words, to accept others' thoughts and ideas without criticizing and arguing is synonymous with being polite in Chinese cultures. Kim also further narrated that she was always attentive of what she said because her culture values interpersonal relationships a lot. Since she was young, she adamantly learned to speak every word carefully so that she did not offend people. She also admitted that she grew up in a big family. It was instilled in her to respect relatives without jumping in or interrupting any conversations and only to talk when it is necessary or meaningful. In addition, she further compared different values in classroom participation in her

country and in the United States. She stated that she was never encouraged to ask any questions or share her experiences in Korea because the class was so structured and teacher-centered. The teachers got irritated and upset when one student had too many opinions and they perceived the questions and sharing as disturbances to their instructional pace. In sum, being polite, being moderate, and being humble which are strongly embedded culturally in the participants' values kept them from participating voluntarily in classroom discussion.

The Language Barrier

Participants in this study acknowledged that English as a foreign language was the crucial barrier in their daily lives, the process of adaptation, and classroom participation. Song narrated that he was perplexed to hear "paper" or "plastic" when he was at cash register in a grocery store the very first time. He assumed "paper" implied the paper money and "plastic" implied a credit card so he kept replying to the clerk "credit card". After realizing it was the bag the clerk was referring to, he felt frustrated with his command of English. He also admitted he tended to pretend that he understood everything instead of asking people to repeat in order not to irritate them because he knew Americans do not have patience for international students.

Min Hee stated that her command of English embarrassed her several times so much that she could never forget it. She mentioned that her American roommate once

said, "there is no soap today." She responded that she could borrow her soap. Her roommate laughed and said, "No! I mean soap opera." Mei-Hua admitted that it seems to her that it is impossible to master a language. She felt frustrated with the mistakes she made almost every day.

Besides, in their daily lives, participants also experienced language barriers in their academic studies. They stated that their true potential was impeded by their inability to express themselves in English even though all of them got more than six hundred on the TOEFL test. This problem was specially manifested in their inability to rise to expectations with regard to meeting writing standards, accomplishing the required readings, and participating in class discussions. Four of the participants stated how much they wished their professors would evaluate the content of their papers more than their language ability, which would make grading fairer for international students. Wang explained that he had been struggling hard to live up to his professors' expectations of good writing. He really hoped that his professors could have more understanding about his writing difficulties as an international student. Song expressed that the effort they put into some courses was not recognized by their professors and this discouraged them most. He also experienced having the same nightmares at night, that he could not write a single word of English at all and kept getting C grades. On a positive note, he said that he really appreciated some

professors' understanding of what international students have encountered and their encouragement of him praising him for working on a graduate degree in a foreign language. Song said his professors were really nice to international students and that they greatly encouraged him to meet their expectations.

Differences in Ways of Knowing

According to participants, though they tended not to participate in classroom discussion due to their language barriers and cultural values, they always engaged in thinking and comparing the points made in the discussion in their minds. Their silence in classroom participation may be perceived as passivity by the professors, but actually it is the most intense intellectual engagement. They conceived of the invisible actions, reflective thinking and careful listening as the most effective learning strategies, however, they were disparaged as passivity and reticence in American classrooms. Kang stated that he could imagine how easy it was for his American classmates to express anything they knew in their native language without reading the assignments. He could easily tell they didn't read but they still could talk actively. For Kang it was amazing that he could never respond in class for fear of revealing his lack of understanding if he hadn't read the assigned readings. All of the twelve participants believed they learned a lot through cognitive activities and active listening, but they still expressed their frustrations at being expected to speak in class but having less

value placed on their mode of active participation.

Experiences and Interactions with Americans

Interactions with American peers also emerged as a particular theme. Wang sensed that American classmates felt bored when he shared his culture or educational systems in class. This discouraged him from speaking up in the class by observing other classmates' impatient facial expressions. Mee Joon also expressed her disappointment:

> One time, I had a car accident so I wore my leg dressing to class. No one in my class approached me and asked me what happened to me. I felt so isolated just like wall paper, and I kept wondering how much attention and regard I would get if I were in my home country.

Wang also narrated his experience:

> One time, I was assigned to a small group with other Americans. They disdained me and my ability as an international student because I might influence their grades as a group. I didn't know what to do and how to act. I wished I disappeared in the world.

Mei-Hua also pinpointed that Taiwanese people greet and treat foreigners in an enthusiastic manner. She said: "W even have an old saying in Chinese: we are extremely joyful and delighted to greet friends from far away." She addressed how

wrong she was to expect Americans to treat her better. She depicted that whenever she went to potluck parties, she felt isolated or invisible because no Americans would attempt to have a conversation with her. To the researchers' surprise, it seemed that Mei-Hua was a sociable and active girl since she always initiated conversation and greeted her friend before class, during the breaks, and after class. However, she still found it hard to be included in American social networks.

Recommendations to Potential Graduate Students

Being Well Prepared

Since all of my participants went through the process of enculturation, they concurred that the prospective students should be well prepared in their English language skills, especially the skill of writing academic papers. Mei-Hua suggested the prospective students be independent and strong because the interpersonal relationship here are not as intense. People should learn how to solve any problem on their own because others will not care about them as much. She further added it was important to learn to drive before coming here because she knew how much one would suffer from waiting for a bus.

Breaking Misconception

Interestingly, most participants mentioned that they should break the misconception or stereotype in terms of American culture they gained from movies

before coming here. Before Wang came for his graduate studies, he thought Americans love to hug and kiss each other enthusiastically. At last, he realized the expressions were only between family and good friends. Min Hee expressed she had an impression that Americans are sweet and kind, she reminds the new comer "do not expect too much."

Sources of Help

Mei-Hua suggested that when international students encounter difficulty, they should turn to the professionals for help, like a counselor in the health center. She stated that the Chinese culture emphasizes that people should keep their own problems to themselves. However, she thought seeking support is more important than losing face. Wang suggested that international students should join any Students Associations that interest them. He described the important role that social support played all the way through his graduate studies. Song agreed that friends from his country were great resources for both social activities and academic studies. He appreciated his friends' kind and immediate help whenever he needed it. He further emphasized the importance of discussion in the process of enculturation. During discussion, he stated, one can express his/her emotion about any harsh experiences with friends and exchange what they had learned with each other. The responses from the participants show that "consulting the more experienced" was the most common

way of gathering information about the program and about the environment. All in all, these direct experiences from the participants provide constructive suggestions for the prospective students and new comers.

Recommendations to the School of Education

Responses to those interview questions indicate that the School of Education, at this university, has several strengths, as well as areas that need improvement. The following are the summaries made by those participants:

1) Continue to provide high quality, caring and knowledgeable professors. (Kang)
2) Continue to encourage teachers to use a wide variety of teaching methods. (Keiko)
3) Encourage a healthy balance between practical and theoretical courses, in each department. (Sakurai)
4) Consider the educational benefits and disadvantages of classes where the majority of students are either native or non-native speakers of English. (Mei-Hua)
5) Explore the level of diversity of faculty expertise, in each department, and measure it against students' needs. (Lily)

Conclusions

This study set out to explore reasons why first year international students chose to come to the School of Education, their expectations, experiences, perceived departmental expectations of them, and advice they would give to prospective students. Ranking and reputation of the university and/or department were significant reasons why many participants chose to attend this university

The participants all suffered from the pains of language barriers, cultural shocks, disappointments and misgivings, and differences in ways of knowing. The twelve participants confirmed their biggest concerns were about their ability to write papers, reading speed, ability to speak in class, understanding discussions and lectures, and comprehending English pragmatics. Some of them found it hard to be accustomed to speaking and writing English in their academic work and daily social life. Since two-thirds of the participants admitted that poor English ability had a negative impact on their learning, making friends, and understanding American culture. It was suggested that the department or college could help to organize some tuition-free or tuition-reduced noncredit English classes or workshops to aid them in overcoming some of their language barriers. Taiwanese students were not encouraged and trained to think independently in their home country. They need to learn new learning styles in order to make their existing knowledge more applicable and practical in the U.S.

setting. Besides, the professors need to understand their difficulty in different ways of knowing. Further, it is suggested that new students also need individual counseling, and a mentor relationship to improve their academic studies, as well as student activities and workshops on relevant topics. Furthermore, it would be beneficial for University officials to work together with the School of Education to provide more meaningful social activities or seminar sessions to help international students to understand American culture and life.

In fact, by means of the participants' experience, it is hoped that this study will offer international students opportunities to understand and share their experiences and further provide the professors and other Americans with a picture of international students' difficulties and cultures. Most importantly, it gives the graduate school some suggestions in regard to supporting international services for prospective international graduate students to adapt to this new culture and environment.

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